

local news

A legacy of caring

Bob Ralphs leaves an eclectic legion of friends and an enduring contribution to human rights

by Inga Sorensen

Bob Ralphs will probably be remembered most for being the driving force behind an expressive and creative campaign designed to keep anti-gay and -lesbian rights initiatives from getting on the ballot. The colorful strategy became known as "bigot busting," and Ralphs will undoubtedly go down in Oregon history as Mr. Bigot Buster.

But friends of Ralphs, who died in early May from a cardiac arrest at the age of 45, say he was not only a brilliant political organizer, but also a man of many talents and interests.

"He was definitely a Renaissance man. He raised show horses and prize chickens, cats and dahlias. He was an absolutely wonderful union organizer and political strategist," says longtime lesbian activist and fellow bigot buster Linda Shirley. "He made his own applesauce and his own bread. He made his own jam. He was an exquisite cook."

"Isn't that the truth," says civil rights activist Suzanne Pharr. "He would come by with homemade jam, and it was just marvelous. One time he pulled up to my house and told me to come out and look in his car trunk—it was filled to the top with apples he had just picked."

Pharr, who moved to Oregon from Arkansas two years ago, says Ralphs was extremely sensitive to the needs of others. "I first met Bob during the No on 9 campaign and we immediately hit it off. When I later moved to Oregon, Bob knew that I missed the South, so he took me out to an auction in Woodburn where there were farmers and

pigs and all sorts of countrylike things. He took me to the state fair and to the beautiful flower fields to see the tulips and irises. He was an immensely sensitive man who not only *said* he cared about things but proved through his actions that he cared."

Ralphs, who spent nearly his entire life in Oregon, was involved in many groups including the Keeston Lowery Democratic Club; the Oregon Public Employees Union; the Rainbow Coalition; No on Hate (a grass-roots group that opposed 1992's anti-gay Ballot Measure 9); the 1993 March on Washington for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered People; and the recently formed grass-roots group Progressive Queers. Pharr says he was a blues and jazz enthusiast with "extraordinary storytelling skills."

In 1991 when the Oregon Citizens Alliance unveiled its "Abnormal Behaviors Initiative," Ralphs organized a "bigot busting" campaign. Under Ralphs' dispatch, opponents would travel out to the various signature-gathering sites, such as malls and shopping centers, and engage potential signers in dialogue about why they should not sign the petitions. The tactic was bold and sometimes led to confrontation, but it also taught people how to engage with one another even under the most stressful and contentious circumstances.

"I can remember heading out to five shopping malls in one afternoon under Bob's direction,"

says 68-year-old Millard Word, one of Ralphs' closest friends.

"I met Bob back in 1972 when he came to work at Dammasch State Hospital and I was assigned to train him. He was 22 and skinny and had lots of hair back then," Word laughs, adding, "Bob was very wise and open-minded. After a couple of months of working with Bob, I got to thinking he was probably gay, so I asked him if he was. Bob—who came from a very religious Quaker background—responded, 'No one ever asked me that before. Let me think about it tonight, and I'll get back to you tomorrow.' Well, he came to work the next day and



Bob Ralphs

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—Suzanne Pharr

he said, 'You know, I've thought about it, and yes, I am gay.'

"I have a phenomenal appreciation for the contributions Bob has made in terms of how we engage," says Marcy Westerling, who heads up the Rural Organizing Project, a grass-roots organization that assists human rights efforts in communities throughout the state. ROP is currently promoting its "Enough Is Enough" campaign, which is designed to create community cohesion through dialogue.

"We try to come up with ways that entire communities can come together," she says. "Bigot busting, which emphasized the need for people to engage each other, is the prime cornerstone of our campaign."

According to Word and Shirley, Ralphs had a multitude of friends representing a vast cross-section of the population.

"The different types of people who showed up for Bob's memorial service were incredible," Shirley says. "You had little blue-haired Quaker ladies, you had horse people and flower people and folks from labor and queers. Bob had a great gift of bringing people together."

Ralphs, who worked as a mental health therapist at Portland's Adventist Hospital, is survived by his mother, Leila Ralphs, and his sister, Sandy Voss, both of Oregon, and a legion of friends.

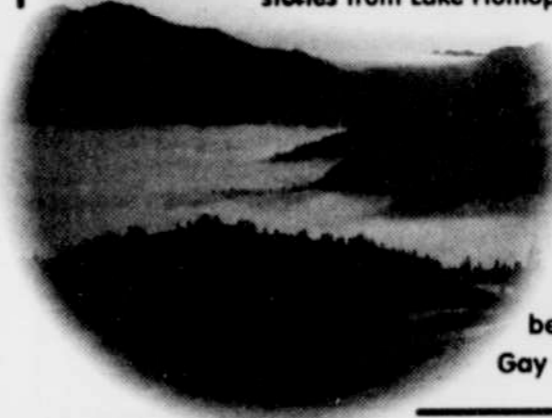
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